

COMMUNITIES IN TRANSITION: COPING WITH GROWTH IN COASTAL SUSSEX COUNTY, DELAWARE

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INTRODUCTION

Delaware is the second smallest state in the United States with only three counties. Sussex County is the southern-most county in the state (and the largest in size) and it enjoys beautiful beaches and bays with a thriving coastal summer tourism industry. In addition, the county also enjoys a vibrant agriculture industry, with poultry and crops (soybeans and corn) the major commodities. During the last few decades the county has experienced dramatic increases in growth, both in numbers of people and sprawling residential and commercial development -- with the coastal areas realizing the greatest increases. Tourism is the major economic force in the eastern one-half of the county (coastal region) with an economic impact estimated at nearly \$600 million annually. Agriculture is the major force on the western side of the county (inland region), contributing in excess of \$600 million annually to the economy of the county.

GROWTH IN SUSSEX COUNTY POPULATION

In 1950, U.S. Census estimates indicated a population of 61,336 residents living in Sussex County. During the next twenty years (1950 to 1970), the population increased to 80,356, an increase of 31% (U.S. Census Bureau, 1995). The next twenty-year period (from 1970 to 1990) saw the population increase 41% to 113,229. Finally, in a ten-year time span, between 1990 and 2000, the population increased 38% countywide to 156,638. Population forecasts by the Delaware Population Consortium (2004) estimate that the county could see a 62% growth rate by 2030 to almost 255,000 people.

The population growth rate for the county as a whole (38%) between 1990 and 2000 does not tell the whole story with regards to the impacts facing the coastal areas of the county. When population figures were examined for the three census tracts along the Delaware coastline (primary coastal tracts), the growth rates between 1990 and 2000 was 59%. Additionally, when the second tier of census tracts surrounding Delaware's inland bays (secondary coastal tracts) was considered, the growth rate for the same time period was 54% (U.S. Census Bureau, 2005). It is clear from these estimates that coastal Sussex County is indeed facing severe growth pressures.

PROBLEMS ASSOCIATED WITH A GROWING COASTAL LANDSCAPE

Like many coastal areas, the commercial and residential growth in Sussex County has contributed to a variety of problems. First and foremost, highway congestion in the coastal region has increased dramatically, and improving and expanding alternate transportation systems is a must. With a growing tourism economy and a burgeoning commercial retail sector, the roads in the coastal areas can become large parking lots at

peak times during the summer months. State Department of Transportation officials estimate that average daily traffic flow along the major Route 1 highway increased by 102% between 1980 and 2000. Preserving open space and conserving agricultural land is also becoming a major concern. Places we assumed were open space – working farms, coastal areas with panoramic vistas of our bays and coastline, quiet country roads – are being converted to residential developments, retail outlets, schools and workplaces. As growth continues, protecting water quality and preserving natural resources in the coastal region has become increasingly difficult.

In order to ensure that development and growth is compatible with local and community character and protects natural resources, comprehensive and coordinated land use planning is essential. In recent years, sprawling developments have sprung up throughout the county and a pattern of uncontrolled, low density, single use growth has been observed. If this growth continues unchecked, it will impact the communities that are cherished by both residents and visitors. In the long run, this type of unsustainable growth does not pay for itself, and costs of services fall on the shoulders of local taxpayers. As growth spirals, towns and municipalities are changing in the face of increasing property values, growing numbers of new residents, and loss of open space. Oftentimes the values and amenities that made a community desirable are being lost. Planning for changing populations becomes a challenge to the county and local jurisdictions and services to meet the needs of new residents may be in a constant state of flux.

CONDUCTING NEEDS ASSESSMENTS OF RESIDENTS TO UNDERSTAND ISSUES AND CONCERNS

Sea Grant has been at the forefront of conducting needs assessments to identify county-wide issues. Often times, key issues of importance are not articulated by the vast majority of residents. Needs assessment surveys help to demonstrate that a wider audience of residents feel strongly about growth and development issues affecting the county and local communities. Two major surveys were initiated to help identify key issues of concern to support educational efforts, and improve stakeholder input. In September 2002, a Sussex County Quality of Life Survey was distributed to 1,600 randomly selected residents in the county to assess residents' opinions and perceptions of a variety of growth and development issues. The second major survey effort involved polling residents of the city of Lewes, Delaware to gain stakeholder input as the town was updating its comprehensive plan. Twenty-nine hundred surveys were mailed to all Lewes property owners in 2003 to get opinions to support issues relevant to the development of the plan. These survey efforts have been useful tools to help identify issues of concern to county residents. The information has also been useful as new educational programs and activities are planned by Sea Grant and our partners to address key issues voiced by stakeholders.

DEVELOPING PARTNERSHIPS

Sea Grant's involvement with sustainable development (Smart Growth) in Delaware started in earnest in 2000 with the creation of a partnership with an emerging community interest group, the Greater Lewes Foundation (GLF). This organization evolved to

protect a valuable piece of canal-front real estate. Community leaders banded together to protest the building of a commercial and residential complex in the location of a former boatyard along the banks of the Lewes-Rehoboth Canal in downtown Lewes. Instead, the group received private donations from local citizens, secured external grants, and garnered the support of the Lewes City Council to purchase the land from the developers and develop it as a public waterfront park. A key component of the GLF's mission is education – educating municipal and county officials, community leaders, planning and zoning commission members. Sea Grant and the Greater Lewes Foundation have partnered to host six major coastal sustainability seminars during the past four years. Both organizations commit an equal share of the costs to host the seminars. We also reach out to other organizations and partners and have been successful in this approach.

In addition to the strong partnership with the GLF, strong ties have been made with the Delaware Coastal Programs (also part of NOAA), the state office that manages the state's coastal management program. Their mission aligns nicely with Sea Grant to help protect and preserve coastal resources. Also partnering with us has been the Center for the Inland Bays (CIB). This nonprofit educational organization oversees the implementation of a Comprehensive Conservation and Management Plan for the Delaware Center for the Inland Bays, a National Estuary Program. Partnerships have also been forged with the American Institute of Architects' (AIA) Delaware Chapter. In addition to helping sponsor our seminar programs, AIA-Delaware offers its members continuing education credits if they participate in our programs. The Sussex County Government has also supported the seminars, and elected county council members and the County Administrator regularly attend our programs to show their support. Two other advocacy groups have also joined us on a regular basis to show their support – the Coastal Coalition (which advocates planned growth throughout the county) and the Positive Growth Alliance (which lobbies for the interests of developers and other businesses in the county).

EDUCATIONAL SEMINARS TO FOSTER CHANGE

The primary means of reaching the intended audiences in Sussex County has been through a series of seminars. Each day-long event concentrates on a specific theme to address some element of Sustainable Coastal Communities. In addition to inviting keynote, nationally known speakers to the events to present a “big-picture” view of the theme, we invite state and local speakers who focus their remarks on specific activities occurring in the county. Six programs have been offered between April 2000 and May 2004 to deal with a number of important issues facing the coastal region in Sussex County.

Open Space Conservation: Sustainable Development for Sussex County – Randall Arendt, nationally known land-use planner and site designer, provided tips at this seminar on ways to conserve open space while creating new homes for an expanding population. He also shared techniques for planning residential developments in harmony with the natural landscape.

Livable Communities: Balancing Growth and Environmental Protection in Sussex County, DE – The seminar theme focused on the Nonpoint Education for Municipal Officials (NEMO) project based at the University of Connecticut, which focuses on the water quality impacts of land use decisions. The emphasis of the NEMO education program is on comprehensive natural resource-based planning as the most effective way to protect the environment.

Sustainable, Integrated Land Use and Transportation Planning in Coastal Sussex County This integrated approach was the theme for this seminar which also highlighted Delaware transportation policy as a component of Governor Minner's "Livable Delaware" initiative and presented case studies demonstrating the benefits of integrating land use and transportation planning.

Community Planning for Open Space and Natural Resource Protection – The purpose of the seminar was to suggest ways that communities and citizens can work together to incorporate plans for open space and protect natural resources as development continues. Seminar attendees learned about the many benefits that open space provides to communities and how to finance and protect open space. The seminar also provided tips on forming innovative partnerships for open space planning and natural resource protection.

Communities in Transition: Coping with Growth in Coastal Sussex County, DE – As growth continues in the county, residents are experiencing social impacts, as well as environmental impacts. The theme of this seminar was to ensure that the sense of community is not being lost as development trends continue. Keynote speaker, Chris Maser, discussed how communities can nurture a healthy future by protecting and preserving their "sense of place".

Town and Regional Planning to Insure Profitability and Profitability – Keynote speakers, Ed McMahon and Randall Arendt, shared their vision on how the county can plan for growth in ways that balance environmental protection with economic returns, that maintain and create livable neighborhoods, that allow us to get from one place to another without encountering major traffic congestion, and that take into account our regional feature of being a seasonal resort community and the uniqueness of individual towns.

CONCLUSIONS AND IMPACTS

The seminar series has led to better working relationships among the development community, environmental groups and community leaders. Members from all of the groups attend the workshops and they seem committed to the protection of valuable pieces of real estate in the county and working to maintain the quality of life that residents enjoy. Developers have even begun working with some of our speakers to use them to review their residential development plans. For example, Randall Arendt was hired by a local developer to review his residential site plans to incorporate better conservation designs.

Another seminar speaker, Ed McMahon (previously with the Conservation Fund, now with the Urban Land Institute), was hired by the Delaware Office of State Planning Coordination to develop the publication, *Better Models for Development in Delaware: Ideas for Creating More Livable and Prosperous Communities*. This publication addresses key ways that developers can make their developments more environmentally sound.

In addition, following a seminar that focused on water quality and natural resource-based planning by speakers from the University of Connecticut NEMO Program, Delaware Sea Grant took the lead to develop a statewide NEMO program. Many public sector agencies and academic departments are participating in the program. A manual to guide local municipalities on how to best plan with natural resources in mind is being developed by this group.

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